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Roma: The Bad City

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roma

THE BAD CITY

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As Aaron Betsky quoted so well in his article Uneternal City, “All roads lead to Rome, but once you get there they turn into spaghetti”. The only way to understand this seemingly tangled road system is by looking into Rome’s past. What began as simple meandering paths along the seven hills transitioned into direct routes between important churches. Once Rome began to grow after its unification in the 1870’s, residential grids were added to the overlay of winding and straight routes. Knowing the layers of urban planning gives you only a distant aerial view of the workings of this modern city. Walking through the streets reveals a completely different story. In the short time that I have lived in Rome, it has become clear that there is conflict between people and machines.

The city is unique in a way that it feels big, but is so compact that almost everything is still within a reasonable walking distance; if only pedestrians had the space. Just one example of this density can be seen on the busy shop-lined street of Via del Corso. Running between Piazza del Popolo and the Vittoriano, the sidewalk has just enough space for window shoppers, forcing others to navigate the space between parked cars and moving traffic. These roads that were once scaled for pedestrians have now been superimposed with the newest modes of transportation. Parked vehicles have even taken over the sidewalks or they are near to non-existent in some parts of the city. It’s a battle for territory on the street, which the vehicles seem to be winning. A growing interest in expanding areas designated only for pedestrians could help level the playing field.

Porta Metronia, one of the gates within the Aurelian Wall, serves as one of these developing pedestrian areas. What was once another winding Roman street has been turned into a peaceful stretch of green space that is now frequented by pedestrians, their dogs and cyclists. Spaces like this signal the beginning of pedestrians reclaiming their place among the infrastructure. If you look more closely, other signs of pedestrian retaliation are visible.



At the same park, bike and walking paths are abruptly cut with clear signage forbidding bikes to go any further, but a dirt trail has been worn away by those who visit the area. In the Esquilino neighborhood, residents frustrated with the lack of bike paths recently took matters into their own hands when they painted a biking lane onto Via di Santa Bibiana. The battle continues to this day as the transportation authorities remove the path, only to have the vigilante urban planners paint their bike lane again. Even residents and shop owners, who typically benefit from traffic, are taking a stand against vehicles. Just a few blocks north of Esquilino is the tranquil street of Via Urbana, though, it wasn't this was until the street was recently closed for repairs.

The stores in the area started getting more business and the residents began to appreciate the calm and quiet that came with the lack of vehicles as their children played in the street. This past December, over 1,200 residents and merchants petitioned to have the road permanently closed. After months of debating, an unfortunate verdict was decided upon in March: Via Urbana would not become pedestrianized. A compromise did lead to the removal of parking spaces, but cars still have access with a stricter speed limit. It is clear that there is a need for pedestrian spaces, which I believe will drive the next layer of urban planning in Rome.

The city believes the solution is to create parking garages, such as a developing project by Diener and Diener that

incorporates a garden space with underground parking options. With compact cars, most vehicle owners would rather park on the sidewalk than pay for an expensive permit. Instead of promoting the use of cars, the city should be emphasizing the pedestrian paths. If these pedestrian routes become wider and safer (the cobblestones are a nice aesthetic until you end up with bruises on your knees), the citizens of Rome would be walking as much as the tourists. Romans are clearly expressing their need for more pedestrian spaces, but the city isn't listening. There will be a point when their voices can't be silenced. The machines may be winning now, but the sacred streets will eventually be home to pedestrians once again. •